

THE RISE OF COMMUNICATIVE CONSUMERS: HOW AFRICAN YOUTHS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SHAPE BRAND NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The digital transformation sweeping across Africa has redefined consumer–brand relationships, with social media emerging as a central platform for interaction. This paper investigates the rise of African youths as communicative consumers, digitally empowered individuals who actively participate in shaping, critiquing, and co-creating brand narratives. Anchored in the Brand Co-creation Model, the study examines how African youths employ local languages, humor, cultural references, and digital activism to influence brand messaging. It further explores the role of user-generated content, micro-influencer networks, and viral online campaigns in amplifying brand stories and driving public perception. Findings reveal that these youths not only enhance brand visibility and cultural relevance but also exercise significant power in holding brands accountable through social media advocacy, trend-setting, and cancel culture dynamics. While this presents opportunities such as increased brand loyalty and global recognition of African creativity, challenges remain, including misinformation, cultural appropriation, and trend volatility. The paper concludes that brands seeking sustained relevance in the African market must adopt culturally authentic messaging, foster long-term collaborations with youth creators, and implement agile, responsive digital engagement strategies.

Keywords: Communicative consumers, African youths, brand narratives, social media, cultural authenticity, participatory culture

Introduction

Over the past decade, Africa has experienced a rapid digital transformation that has reshaped communication, commerce, and culture. With the expansion of internet infrastructure and the widespread adoption of smartphones, digital technologies have become an integral part of everyday life for millions of Africans. This transformation has been particularly pronounced among young people, who constitute the majority demographic on the continent (Astuti & Ayinde, 2025). Today, African youths are not only avid consumers of digital content but also key contributors to online conversations that influence markets, politics, and social movements. The proliferation of affordable mobile data plans and increased connectivity has positioned platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube as the primary spaces for youth expression in Africa. Whether in Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg, or Accra, young Africans use social media to communicate their aspirations, showcase creativity, and engage with global audiences. Beyond personal expression, these platforms serve as channels for economic empowerment, cultural exportation, and brand engagement, making the African digital sphere one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic in the world (Ezeaka et al., 2025).

In contemporary marketing discourse, the concept of the “communicative consumer” refers to individuals who actively shape brand meaning through dialogue, storytelling, and collaborative engagement. Unlike passive audiences of traditional advertising, communicative consumers demand interactivity, transparency, and cultural resonance from brands. Moreover, African youths have embraced this role with remarkable energy, often using creative formats such as memes, viral challenges, and short-form videos to participate in shaping the narratives surrounding the products and services they consume. This shift from passive consumption to active co-creation reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between brands and their audiences (Gupta, 2025). Young Africans are not content with receiving top-down marketing messages; they actively remix, reinterpret, and

sometimes challenge brand narratives to reflect their lived realities and cultural values. Through user-generated content, peer-to-peer recommendations, and online activism, these communicative consumers are influencing not only the visibility of brands but also their reputations and market performance (Sharma, 2025).

Despite the growing influence of African youths in shaping brand narratives, scholarly and industry analyses have largely focused on Western markets, leaving a gap in understanding the specific ways African digital participation transforms branding. The socio-cultural contexts of African countries, ranging from linguistic diversity to economic inequality create unique conditions for digital engagement that differ significantly from other regions. This lack of localized insight limits the ability of brands to design strategies that resonate authentically with African youth audiences (Chikweche et al., 2025; Mlambo et al., 2025). Studying African youths as communicative consumers is essential for both academic inquiry and practical marketing strategy. Their engagement patterns reveal much about the evolution of consumer-brand relationships in the digital era, while also highlighting the potential of social media as a tool for cultural preservation, innovation, and activism. Understanding these dynamics can enable brands to harness the creative power of youth communities, fostering deeper loyalty and relevance in competitive markets. The purpose of this paper is to examine how African youths use social media to influence and shape brand narratives. Focusing on African case studies and youth-led campaigns, it offers a context-specific perspective that contributes to both marketing scholarship and brand practice. The study emphasizes that African youths, empowered by digital platforms and fueled by cultural creativity, have emerged as powerful agents in redefining brand narratives. For brands seeking sustained relevance in Africa's digital economy, acknowledging and embracing the role of these communicative consumers is not merely optional but a strategic imperative.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Participatory Culture Theory propounded by Henry Jenkins in his influential 2006 work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Jenkins developed the concept to describe the shift in media consumption brought about by digital technologies, arguing that audiences are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in creating, modifying, and sharing content (Cabuk & Sirer, 2025). Participatory culture marks a departure from traditional, top-down media distribution models, replacing them with interactive, collaborative, and user-driven systems. The theory defines participatory culture as an environment where individuals contribute to the creation and circulation of content with relatively low barriers to entry, supported by platforms and communities that encourage creative expression (Xu et al., 2023). In the African context, participatory culture is particularly evident among the continent's youth, who form the largest demographic group and the most digitally active population segment. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube have dramatically reduced the barriers to content creation, enabling young Africans to engage in brand-related storytelling through videos, memes, hashtags, and online challenges. These platforms not only allow youths to amplify their voices but also facilitate the creation of communities bound by cultural identity, creativity, and shared values (Donga et al., 2025). African youths' interactions with brands illustrate all core elements of participatory culture. For instance, the low barrier to entry allows a young entrepreneur in Lagos to create a viral TikTok video featuring a local fashion label, potentially attracting thousands of views in hours. Informal mentorship occurs as established influencers provide guidance directly or indirectly to emerging creators on how to present content that resonates with audiences and attracts brand partnerships. The belief that every contribution matter is evident in online campaigns where individual posts can trigger brand responses, shape product design, or even influence corporate social responsibility initiatives.

This theoretical framework is especially relevant to the concept of communicative consumers explored in this paper. African youths are no longer passive recipients of advertising messages; they actively remix, reinterpret, and sometimes challenge brand narratives to reflect their own cultural realities and values. Through participatory culture, they wield the ability to either boost a brand's credibility via authentic advocacy or damage its image through coordinated online critique and activism. The rise of "cancel culture" in African digital spaces, where consumers

collectively hold brands accountable for perceived cultural insensitivity or unethical behavior, further demonstrates the active role these consumers play in brand meaning-making.

Concept of Communicative Consumers

Communicative consumers are individuals who actively engage with brands and other consumers in shaping, interpreting, and disseminating brand-related messages. Unlike traditional consumers, who passively receive marketing content, communicative consumers participate in a two-way dialogue, often leveraging digital platforms to share opinions, create user-generated content, and influence public perceptions of a brand. Their interactions can involve endorsement, critique, or reinterpretation of brand narratives, making them co-creators in the branding process. This shift is driven by the rise of social media, which provides accessible channels for immediate feedback, cultural expression, and collective action (Pramesworo et al., 2024). In the African context, communicative consumers particularly youths use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter) not only to engage with brands but also to embed cultural identity, social activism, and creativity into their interactions, thereby amplifying their influence on how brands are perceived both locally and globally (Donga et al., 2025).

Brand Narratives

Brand narratives are the consistent and evolving stories that express a brand's identity, mission, values, and emotional promise to its audience. These narratives are constructed through a combination of official brand communications "advertising campaigns, corporate statements", consumer experiences "word-of-mouth, reviews", and cultural interactions "social trends, community engagement". A strong brand narrative connects emotionally with audiences, providing not just a reason to purchase a product but a story that aligns with their personal and cultural identity (Do et al., 2024). For instance, Guinness' "Black Shines Brightest" campaign in Africa did more than promote a beverage, it told a story of African creativity, ambition, and pride, incorporating music, art, and street culture from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. This narrative resonated strongly with young consumers who saw their identities reflected in the brand's storytelling. Conversely, a weak or inauthentic narrative can alienate audiences, as seen when some multinational brands use African cultural symbols without context, leading to backlash (Omeje et al., 2022).

Concept of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is the practice of using digital media tools and platforms to craft and share narratives that communicate ideas, values, or experiences. It combines traditional storytelling elements such as character, plot, and emotional appeal with multimedia components like images, audio, video, animations, and interactive features to create engaging, immersive content. In branding, digital storytelling serves as a strategic means of building connections with audiences by presenting authentic, relatable, and culturally resonant messages (Yu & Wang, 2025). Social media has expanded the reach and interactivity of digital storytelling, enabling audiences to comment on, remix, and co-create brand-related content in real time. In the African context, digital storytelling often integrates local languages, cultural motifs, humor, and music, allowing brands and consumers alike to craft narratives that reflect shared identities, contemporary realities, and aspirational visions (Rubio-Hurtado, 2022).

Overview of Social Media Usage among African Youths

The growth of internet connectivity and mobile technology across Africa has transformed the way young people interact, communicate, and consume information. With over 70% of the continent's population, African youth represent the largest and most dynamic segment of digital users. The expansion of affordable smartphones and competitive mobile data plans has enabled millions of young Africans to access social media platforms as part of their daily routines. This technological shift has created a vibrant online environment where youth culture,

entrepreneurship, and activism converge, making social media one of the most influential spaces in modern African society (Njathi & Watkins, 2024). Mobile phone penetration has been a decisive factor in the surge of youth engagement on social media. Countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa have recorded some of the fastest-growing rates of smartphone adoption, with mobile internet accounting for the majority of connections (FurtherAfrica, 2022). Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube dominate the digital ecosystem, each attracting unique forms of engagement. TikTok's short-form videos, Instagram's visual storytelling, and Twitter's fast-paced conversational threads provide young Africans with multiple avenues for expression, creativity, and interaction. These platforms are not only tools for social connection but also critical channels for marketing, brand-building, and cultural influence (Sharma, 2024).

Social media use among African youths. Most active users fall within the 18–35 age bracket, a group that is both technologically adept and highly responsive to global trends. This demographic is also more likely to blend local cultural references with global digital trends, creating hybrid forms of online expression that reflect Africa's diverse identities (Maxwell, 2025). For example, Ghanaian TikTok creators often incorporate Afrobeats soundtracks and local slang into global dance challenges, giving them a distinctive African twist while still engaging international audiences. Cultural and economic influences also drive patterns of social media engagement. African popular culture especially music, fashion, and film has become a dominant theme in online content (Royston, 2024). The global success of Afrobeats musicians like Burna Boy, Tems, and Rema has not only expanded Africa's cultural footprint but also boosted the digital visibility of brands associated with these artists. Many youths leverage these cultural movements to build personal brands, launch businesses, or advocate for social causes (Emily, 2024). Youth-led creative industries spanning fashion labels, digital art, comedy skits, and beauty brands rely heavily on social media for promotion and customer engagement, often bypassing traditional advertising channels (Chawla et al., 2025).

The online behaviours of African youths reveal a highly participatory and interactive digital culture. Memes, hashtag challenges, and live-streamed events are among the most common forms of engagement. Hashtags such as #DontRushChallenge, #MadeInAfrica, and #AfricaToTheWorld have served as rallying points for collective creativity, encouraging users to share themed content while reinforcing a sense of community and shared identity. These trends often spill over into brand marketing, with companies adopting viral hashtags to reach young audiences in culturally resonant ways (Collins-Dike, et al., 2025). Influencer culture is another defining feature of youth social media usage in Africa. Influencers ranging from high-profile celebrities to niche micro-influencers play a key role in shaping trends, amplifying brand messages, and driving consumer engagement. Young Africans often place high trust in influencers who are perceived as authentic and relatable, making influencer marketing a powerful strategy for brands (Fasiku & Mohammed, 2025). For example, South African micro-influencers have successfully promoted local fashion and beauty products through Instagram reels and TikTok videos, generating significant sales without the need for expensive advertising campaigns (Adebayo et al., 2025). Economic conditions influence how African youths engage with social media, with urban users enjoying greater internet access while rural and lower-income users rely on affordable data bundles and free-access platforms. These limitations shape content formats, yet young Africans continue to display creativity in maximising their digital impact. Social media serves as a space where identity, commerce, and community converge, enabling self-expression, brand building, public discourse, and cultural exchange (Mack et al., 2024). Understanding these patterns is vital for brands seeking authentic engagement, as this dynamic environment underpins the role of African youths as communicative consumers shaping brand narratives that reflect their realities and aspirations.

The Rise of Communicative Consumers

In the African digital marketplace, a profound transformation has occurred in the relationship between brands and their audiences. African youths are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages; rather, they are active participants in shaping, amplifying, and sometimes even redefining brand narratives. This shift from passive consumption to active engagement marks the rise of the “communicative consumer” an audience segment that not

only consumes brand content but also responds to, modifies, and redistributes it across their personal and collective networks. The widespread adoption of smartphones, the cultural vibrancy of youth-driven movements, and the participatory nature of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X have given African youths unprecedented influence over how brands are perceived (Kayode & Alex-Ojei, 2024). One of the clearest markers of this shift is the way young people use digital tools to engage in brand storytelling. For instance, Nigerian youths have embraced TikTok as a platform to remix brand campaigns, incorporating local humour, language, and music to make corporate messages more relatable. A similar pattern emerged in South Africa, where youth-created parodies of a Coca-Cola jingle went viral, prompting the brand to incorporate elements of these user-generated videos into its official advertisements. Such interactions blur the boundaries between producer and consumer, transforming brand communication into a collaborative process. This new engagement dynamic is also visible in crowd-driven product reviews on platforms like Twitter, where real-time feedback has influenced companies such as Nigerian fintech firms to modify app interfaces, pricing plans, or customer service approaches almost overnight (Ndineyi, 2024). The rise of communicative consumers also redefines the power dynamics between brands and audiences. African youths increasingly use social media to hold companies accountable, amplifying both praise and criticism with equal intensity. The influence of “cancel culture,” while often associated with Western digital spaces, has found a local expression in Africa. During the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, for example, brands that failed to acknowledge the movement or express solidarity faced online backlash, while those that supported the cause experienced increased loyalty and engagement (Aubyn & Frimpong, 2022). This phenomenon represents more than just a change in marketing trends; it signifies a deeper cultural and generational shift in consumer-brand relations. For African youths, digital interaction with brands is not merely transactional, it is part of their identity-making process, their civic engagement, and their cultural expression. The rise of communicative consumers, therefore, challenges companies to move beyond top-down messaging and embrace a more dialogical, participatory approach to branding. Brands that fail to recognise this shift risk being sidelined in conversations that matter most to the very audiences they seek to reach (Gabriel, 2024).

Opportunities and Challenges

The rise of African youths as communicative consumers offers both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges for brands seeking relevance in the continent’s rapidly evolving digital landscape. On the opportunity side, the interactive nature of youth engagement on social media allows brands to build deep, authentic connections with their audiences. Unlike the one-way communication model of traditional advertising, digital platforms enable brands to co-create content with their consumers, integrating user-generated material, real-time feedback, and culturally resonant storytelling. This participatory approach not only fosters loyalty but also transforms customers into brand advocates, amplifying messages within their peer networks. For instance, African youths have propelled local and global brands into viral fame by organically sharing product reviews, creating challenge-based campaigns, and embedding brand messages into music, dance, and fashion trends. Such authentic endorsements carry a credibility that paid advertisements often lack, positioning youth-driven engagement as a valuable marketing asset. Furthermore, the growth of African creative industries provides brands with an expanding pool of talent to collaborate with, from musicians and fashion designers to digital artists and micro-influencers. Youth-led initiatives have also contributed to the global recognition of African culture, with brands benefiting from the continent’s rising soft power. Campaigns that integrate African music genres such as Afrobeats, Amapiano, or Bongo Flava, alongside visual styles rooted in African heritage, have resonated strongly both locally and internationally. This global appeal offers brands the opportunity to position themselves as culturally relevant and socially aware, thereby expanding their reach beyond Africa’s borders. In addition, such collaborations can foster sustainable economic opportunities, empowering young creatives and reinforcing the brand’s role as a partner in community development.

However, these opportunities come with significant challenges that brands must navigate carefully. One major issue is the short-lived nature of digital trends. Viral challenges, memes, and hashtags often have brief lifespans, making it

difficult for brands to sustain relevance without constantly reinventing their messaging. Overreliance on fleeting trends can lead to brand fatigue or superficial engagement that fails to translate into long-term loyalty. Another challenge lies in the risk of misinformation and brand misrepresentation. The same platforms that allow positive consumer-brand interaction can also amplify negative narratives, whether through deliberate smear campaigns or unverified claims. Brands must also address the growing concern over cultural appropriation, particularly when incorporating African elements into campaigns. Misusing cultural symbols without proper context or respect can provoke backlash and damage credibility. In sum, the influence of African youths as communicative consumers presents a double-edged sword. Brands that approach this demographic with cultural sensitivity, strategic consistency, and genuine collaboration can unlock powerful opportunities for growth and relevance. Conversely, those that underestimate the speed, complexity, and cultural depth of youth-driven engagement risk being sidelined or publicly challenged in the very spaces they seek to dominate. The key to success lies in balancing creativity with authenticity, leveraging the dynamism of African youth culture while building sustainable, respectful, and mutually beneficial brand relationships.

Implications for Brands and Marketing in Africa

The rise of African youths as communicative consumers carries profound implications for brands and marketing strategies on the continent. No longer content with being passive recipients of promotional messages, this demographic now actively participates in the creation, modification, and dissemination of brand narratives. Brands that fail to recognise and adapt to this participatory shift risk losing cultural relevance, credibility, and market share (Sestino et al., 2022). The interactive nature of African youth engagement necessitates a rethinking of traditional top-down marketing models towards more collaborative and community-driven approaches. Firstly, the shift underscores the necessity of co-creation and audience collaboration. Brands must intentionally integrate youth perspectives into product development, content creation, and campaign design (Donga et al., 2025). For example, fintech companies like Flutterwave and PiggyVest have successfully harnessed social media polls, open design contests, and influencer-driven ideation to develop services that resonate with youth expectations (Abu Hmeidan & Masoud, 2025). Secondly, the changing landscape calls for culturally sensitive and inclusive branding. African youths are deeply aware of the nuances of cultural representation, and their collective voice on platforms like TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) can amplify praise or criticism within hours. Campaigns that leverage local languages, proverbs, humour, and visual symbols such as Guinness' "Black Shines Brightest" or MTN's "Everywhere You Go" remixes tend to generate stronger emotional connections. However, this cultural integration must be authentic to avoid accusations of tokenism or cultural appropriation, which can trigger boycotts and long-term brand damage (Babalola & Sedisa, 2025). Thirdly, the power shift demands long-term influencer partnerships rather than short-lived endorsements. African youths often seek authenticity and relatability in influencers, favouring micro-influencers who maintain close engagement with their communities over celebrity endorsements with low interaction (Garg & Gopal, 2025). Collaborations that go beyond single campaign cycles such as Puma's ongoing relationship with Nigerian music artists help reinforce brand consistency and deepen trust. Finally, brands must be prepared for real-time feedback loops and rapid adaptation. The same digital tools that enable brand promotion also enable public critique. Negative reactions can go viral quickly, forcing brands into defensive or corrective actions. Proactive listening strategies, social media monitoring, and agile marketing teams are essential to respond effectively. Companies like Safaricom and Infinix Mobile have demonstrated the benefits of acknowledging customer feedback promptly and transparently, turning potential crises into opportunities for trust-building (Widjaja et al., 2025).

Conclusion

African youths have emerged as a formidable force in the digital branding landscape, redefining the relationship between consumers and corporations. No longer content with passively receiving marketing messages, they actively shape, critique, and co-create brand narratives through social media. This transformation signals a fundamental shift

in consumer culture, where young people's voices, creativity, and cultural expressions determine whether a brand thrives or fades. The communicative consumer phenomenon underscores the need for brands to see their audiences not merely as targets but as collaborators in meaning-making. Central to this change is the power of digital participation. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) give African youths tools to tell their own stories, often integrating local languages, humor, and cultural references that resonate deeply with their peers. This participatory culture extends beyond product endorsement; it encompasses activism, accountability, and the redefinition of brand identity in ways that align with community values. The result is a dynamic, two-way conversation where consumers influence the creative direction, tone, and ethical stance of brands in real time. Cultural authenticity has emerged as the cornerstone of brand trust in this new environment. Youth-led campaigns highlight the importance of representation and genuine engagement, rewarding brands that celebrate African creativity and penalizing those that misappropriate or misrepresent it. Brands that collaborate with micro-influencers, local artists, and digital activists often gain credibility and emotional loyalty that large-scale, top-down advertising cannot achieve. In this sense, African youths function as both cultural custodians and innovation drivers in the global branding arena. However, the growing influence of communicative consumers also places significant pressure on brands. The speed of online trends, the volatility of public opinion, and the threat of cancel culture require brands to be agile, transparent, and responsive. Missteps are amplified in the digital space, and reputational recovery is increasingly difficult in the face of organized online criticism. Nevertheless, brands that embrace transparency, listen to feedback, and engage in continuous dialogue with their audiences can turn potential crises into opportunities for stronger connections.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to guide brands, marketers, and researchers in leveraging the potential of African youths in shaping impactful brand narratives.

1. Brands should involve African youth influencers, digital creatives, and community leaders early in campaign planning, rather than merely hiring them for promotion after a product launch. Early collaboration ensures the brand message reflects authentic cultural nuances and resonates with the target audience's values.
2. Marketing teams should integrate local languages, traditions, humor, and fashion trends into campaigns while avoiding stereotypes or cultural appropriation. This approach strengthens emotional connections and reinforces brand trust among young consumers who value representation.
3. Brands should leverage polls, live chats, interactive stories, and user-generated content challenges to gather ongoing feedback from youth audiences. Incorporating these insights into product updates and messaging helps maintain relevance and responsiveness in a fast-moving digital environment.
4. Rather than short, one-off campaigns, brands should develop sustained relationships with youth influencers and micro-influencers who have credibility in their niches. Long-term partnerships foster deeper trust, authenticity, and consistent messaging over time.
5. Given the speed at which cancel culture and online criticism can escalate, brands should create proactive strategies for digital crisis response. This includes clear communication protocols, rapid apology mechanisms, and transparent corrective actions to maintain or restore public trust.

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